**Dylan Wiliam on Teacher Learning Communities**

Section from a keynote address by Prof Dylan Wiliam, Institute of Education, University of London. Delivered at a Conference on Assessment for Learning, Cambridge, England, 2004.

The title of his address was ***Assessment for Learning: why, what and how***. In this selected section he describes his experience of helping teachers use assessment for learning, but what he says applies to teaching practices generally.

He deals with:

* What is the nature of knowledge about teaching practice?
* How is this learnt?
* Teacher learning communities and how to support them

For example, if you were the headteacher of a school, and you wanted to tell staff about new procedures that the government had introduced about the reporting of child abuse, then herding all the teachers into an auditorium and telling them about the new rules would be a pretty effective and efficient way to do it. Your explicit knowledge would be communicated as explicit knowledge to someone else.

However, most of the knowledge that’s important in teaching is not of that kind – most of the knowledge that we have in teaching is implicit. It’s not something we can actually put into words and so we need to think differently about how knowledge gets transferred. For example, sometimes other people’s implicit knowledge gets picked up implicitly, through a process of socialization. One learns how things work, without ever being told, and sometimes without the words to describe it. Sometimes, implicit knowledge becomes explicit knowledge through a process of externalization. For example, the first time I had student teachers in my classroom, I realized that I had a very poor understanding of how I did what I did. I ended up telling them just to do what I did. However, as I began to think about how to support student teachers, I became more reflective about my own practice, and as a result, began to develop explicit language for what I did—a process of externalization. The final process in Nonaka and Tageuchi’s model is the opposite—internalization—by which explicit knowledge becomes implicit. A good example of this is when one has been told something, but only after an extended period of practice and reflection does one get the sudden insight: “Aha, *that’s* what she meant!”. One can have the words for something but not really know what the words meant until they become internalized.

The important thing about this model is that it helps us think about creating knowledge in schools and, in particular, it shows the poverty of just telling people the solution. Now I want to make it clear that I’m not against telling people what to do in certain situations; if we want to increase teachers’ subject knowledge the best way is to put them into a classroom and teach them stuff. That’s a very effective and efficient model. It just doesn’t change practice. Every teacher I have ever met knows the research on “wait time”: the fact that students learn more if teachers wait at least three seconds after asking a question before providing hints or moving on to another student. The problem is that they just don’t do this when they are teaching. So the problem is not putting more facts into people’s heads, the problem is helping people live those practices in their classrooms, and the biggest problem is the simple fact that every single one of you learnt most of what you know about teaching before you were 18 years old. You learned about what it is to be a teacher, and the “scripts” of school in the 13 years you spent there as a student. The time you spent on a teacher training course is never going to shift those models. That’s why changing practice is so hard. We are talking about changing habits, not acquiring facts. Teacher professional developers have more to learn from Weight Watchers than from traditional educational psychology. Weight Watchers really understands that it’s about changing habits, not about changing knowledge. It’s about changing what people do day in, day out. If you’re serious about changing teachers’ practice in the classroom you have to help them change habits. And the way to do that is through small, school-based, teacher learning communities—groups of teachers that meet together regularly to support each other in making changes in their classrooms.

To recap, the argument so far is this: if you’re serious about raising student achievement you have to improve teachers’ use of assessment for learning; if you’re serious about helping teachers implement assessment for learning in their own practice, you have to help them do that for themselves as you cannot tell teachers what to do; and the only way to do that at scale is through school-based teacher learning communities. The good news is that you do not need experts to come in and tell you what to do. What you need is for you, as groups of teachers, to hold yourselves accountable for making changes in your practice. Implementing assessment for learning requires changing teachers’ habits. Teachers know most of what I’ve talked about today already so the problem is not a lack of knowledge, it’s a lack of understanding of what it means to do assessment for learning in practice. That’s why telling teachers what to do doesn’t work and experience alone is not enough. If it were, the teachers who actually get the best value-added would be the most experienced teachers, and we know that’s not true. Most teachers don’t improve after about the sixth or seventh year in practice. That would be a very negative finding but for the fact that most of the inservice support that teachers are getting is not focused on changing practice. A typical five day in-service programme for a school year might have a day on differentiation, a day on personalised learning, a day on this, a day on that, and it’s all missing the point, because the only thing that matters is giving teachers time to hold each other accountable for making small incremental changes to their practice. People need to reflect on their experience in systematic ways that build their accessible knowledge base to learn from mistakes, and that’s what teacher learning communities (TLCs) are for. TLCs contradict teacher isolation, reprofessionalise teaching by valuing teacher expertise, deprivatise teaching so that teachers can talk about it, and offer a steady support for struggling teachers. (Here’s an interesting aside: I used to run a PGCE course and sometimes students would need to do an extra period of teaching practice because they hadn’t reached the standard after the first period. I learned that if they needed to do a second teaching practice the best place to put them was in the toughest schools because everybody there was struggling so they’d get much more support. The best thing that ever happened to me in my career was that my first school in London was on the White City estate in West London where everybody came out of their classrooms at 3.30 pm and said “Bloody hell”. Even experienced teachers were having problems keeping the students in the classroom, let alone engaged in their learning. That was so powerful for me because we talked about things we might do, rather than pretending that everything was going well.) TLCs provide a regular space, time and structure for reflecting on teaching and practice; they facilitate sharing of untapped expertise and they build the collective knowledge base of the school.

Some people call these groups professional learning communities, but I prefer the term teacher learning communities, because in my view, if you are not a teacher, you cannot be a full participant in the community. The only people who can be full participants are those who are struggling to make these changes in their classrooms. Advisory teachers, heads, and others think they remember what it was like in the classroom but they don’t. They can be peripheral participants and provide support, but they’ll never be full participants because they don’t know what it’s really like.

So the synergy here is the idea of assessment for learning as the content of teacher change and teacher learning communities as the process. The model that I think would be implementable at scale is to establish monthly workshops about these kinds of ideas, so at the end of each meeting each participant promises her or his colleagues about what they are going to try out during the coming month. At the next meeting, everyone (everyone!) comes back to report on how it went. Repeatedly, we’ve had teachers comment on how silly they felt initially writing down their promise for the group, but expressing surprise that it does actually work. It’s like Weight Watchers—promising to try something out and then being held accountable at the end of that process. It’s what makes you prioritise developing your practice over all the other things that everybody tells you are priorities in school as well. Genuine peer observations, working with people at the same level as you in the system, also work well, when the agenda for the peer observation is set by the person being observed, rather than the person doing the observation.

I think this is a model for lifelong teacher development. It’s what the Japanese teachers do through “lesson study”. It’s not something that you do in order to get good and then stop doing. The great thing about teaching is that you never get any good at it; you never crack it. That’s what makes it so frustrating, so challenging, and yet so rewarding. Why is assessment for learning such an important part of this picture? Assessment is the bridge between teaching and learning. Assessment is the only way you can find out whether what you’ve taught has been learned.